

To: City Council

From: Debbie Laurie

RE: Extension of Funding for Emergency Shelter and Quarantine & Isolation Services at Ramada Inn

The impetus for this workshop was to discuss the extension of eligibility to utilize FEMA disaster funding for the provision of emergency shelter and quarantine and isolation beds and associated services through December 31, 2021. In order to add greater context to this discussion, I thought it would be helpful to provide some very basic background information, outline resources and identify specific steps undertaken by the City.

### Introduction

Over the past few years, homelessness in Bangor has become more visible. The Bangor Area Homeless Shelter (BAHS) and Penobscot Community Health Care's Hope House, the only low barrier shelter, (PCHC) provide shelter to adults experiencing homelessness while Community Care's Shaw House serves young adults. Unfortunately, all shelters are struggling to meet the demand. An ever-increasing number of individuals are living unsheltered in our parks, open spaces, near businesses and even in residential areas, and shelter wait lists are growing. The increase in unsheltered individuals is primarily due to the lack of safe and affordable housing as well as some who are unable to avail themselves of services and shelter options for their own individual reasons. There are as many reasons for homelessness as there are people who find themselves in that position, but there is little doubt that co-occurring mental illness and substance use disorder present unique and significant challenges, and have led to some of the increasing pressure on the homeless response system.

### July 2018 – June 2019 Bangor Adult Homeless Shelter Data\* (Pre-pandemic)

Origin of Individual	BAHS	PCHC	Total
Bangor	149	204	353
ME – not Bangor	183	258	441
Out of State	76	72	148
Unreported	6	5	11
Total	414	539	953

### July 2020 – June 2021 Bangor Adult Homeless Shelter Data\* (Mid-pandemic)

Origin of Individual	BAHS	PCHC	Total
Bangor	82	131	213
ME – not Bangor	142	146	288
Out of State	21	29	50
Unreported	11	79**	90
Total	256	385	641

(\* Source Maine State Housing Authority (MSHA) HMIS database)

(\*\* Unreported includes one-time limited length stays related to a migrant farm worker outbreak)

In our interactions with individuals experiencing homelessness, we've learned that many individuals experiencing homelessness come to Bangor to seek opportunities for housing, availability of public

transportation, access to services, or as a result of the actions of others who believe the best options available are here in Bangor.

### **Bangor Shelter Beds**

	Pre-Pandemic Bed Levels	Current Bed Levels
PCHC (Hope House)	66	30
BAHS	37	32
Shaw House	18	18
Total	121	80

The need for social distancing dramatically reduced the number of shelter beds available.

### **Ramada Inn 2020-2021**

In early 2020, hotels throughout the State were used to shelter those sleeping outside as part of the pandemic response. In September 2020, with the surge in COVID 19 cases and the need to provide shelter beds for those displaced due social distancing protocols and allow space for individuals who needed to quarantine or isolate away from others when testing positive or awaiting test results, MSHA contracted with hotels and service providers around the State for these purposes. The contracts with service providers were to provide services and support to those in the emergency shelter beds as well as those who found themselves in need of quarantine and isolation spaces. These contracts were funded through an allocation by the State of Maine of FEMA disaster relief funding. The initial funding allocation expired on September 30, 2021.

### **Encampments**

City Ordinances prohibits camping within public parks, and in general, occupying a tent on nonresidential property. However, recent court cases have indicated that the City (or any other municipality) may be barred from not allowing camping for people who have no other shelter.

So while encampments of individuals experiencing homelessness have existed within the City for years, there seems to be a notable increase since the onset of the pandemic. This increase is likely tied to the lack of available housing. The homelessness response system is designed to move an individual through the process into housing, when housing isn't available, the system isn't able to function, thereby creating a backlog of individuals in need of assistance with no place to go. This situation is not unique to Bangor or any other Maine service center communities, it is a trend seen nationwide.

### **Other Resources Available in Bangor**

The City is home to a number of agencies and groups working to provide support to individuals experiencing homelessness or those in need, in addition to the work that occurs every day in the shelters.

- Homeless Outreach Case Management – City of Bangor, Community Health & Counseling Services (PATH), and Wellness Integrated Supportive Housing (WISH) navigators (through PCHC)
- Food, Clothing & Showers – The Salvation Army, Bangor Ecumenical Food Cupboard, Manna Ministries Food Bank & Soup Kitchen, Brick Church, Health Equity Alliance, Samaritan Inc, Food Cupboard
- Warming Centers – BAHS, Brick Church, Mansion Church

- Housing Assistance Vouchers – City of Bangor – General Assistance & Shelter Plus Care, Community Health & Counseling Services – Bridging Rental Assistance Program, Bangor Housing – Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8), Penquis CAP – Emergency Rental Assistance, and dedicated HCV and Rapid Rehousing vouchers for people experiencing homelessness.

### **City of Bangor Efforts**

The City of Bangor has and continues to devote significant resources to address this challenging issue. Our General Assistance program provides over \$135,000 in rental assistance to shelters. Our Shelter Plus Care Program, funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, provides over \$1,000,000 to support the housing of over 210 individuals who have experienced long term homelessness in the past. Our Community Development Block Grant program provided \$289,000 to organizations including the Brick Church, Columbia Street Church, the BAHS and Hope for the Homeless, all in support of their efforts to assist those experiencing homelessness.

In addition our City provides much needed direct services. Our homeless outreach caseworker has successfully transitioned 44 individuals from homelessness to stable housing in the last two years. Our police department, through a partnership with Northern Light's Acadia Hospital, includes three mental health practitioners, who respond to calls with officers as a means of providing extra support to individuals in crisis. Our community services officers are in the field daily working to support the efforts of others and on their own to connect and protect this vulnerable population. Our public health and police department staff, in conjunction with Community Health and Counseling Services, have established an overdose response team, with a focus on connecting with people within 72 hours of an overdose to provide support and referral services. Our public health nurses provide basic health and medical assistance, including vaccinations to individuals experiencing homelessness. Our parks and recreation and public works departments clean up waste left at the numerous abandoned encampments, make regular rounds of our parks and public spaces to clear needle waste to ensure the safety of our citizens, and when necessary, provide property storage for those experiencing homelessness while seeking relocation or housing options.

### **Ramada Inn October – December 2021**

City, PCHC and MSHA staff have been meeting regularly since early this summer in preparation for the expiration of the FEMA disaster funding. In late August 2021, the State of Maine was informed, that the FEMA funding for this purpose would be extended to December 31, 2021, which resulted in a change to the options available to address the needs of those currently being housed at the Ramada Inn.

All parties agreed to terms for a two week (October 1 – October 15, 2021) contract period between MSHA and the Ramada Inn and MSHA and PCHC to allow for additional time for all parties to develop a final proposal for consideration. This two week extension reduced the number of rooms for emergency shelter purposes from 60 to 52 as well as the number of rooms for quarantine and isolation purposes from 40 to 20. While the City is not a party to the contracts, MSHA requires that the contracts be supported by the municipality in which they are located.

As noted above, MSHA requires the project to have municipal support and the extended FEMA funding requires a depopulation plan. The depopulation plan must show a reduction in occupancy over the balance of the contract so that on December 31, 2021, there are no individuals being housed at the Ramada Inn. While the goal is to transition individuals into housing, all parties recognize that in this

current housing market it is unlikely that this goal is achievable and some individuals will become unsheltered. This issue is further exacerbated by the current occupancy limits at the Hope House due to social distancing protocols, which results in a loss of 36 shelter beds (66-30) at that location.

In order to minimize a reduction in shelter beds and allow for a more focused effort from PCHC's staff to work with individuals to obtain housing/services, PCHC would like to renovate the existing Hope House site to create portable sleeping barriers within their existing dormitory style facility to increase the number of available shelter beds from 30 to 43. PCHC is also reviewing recent CDC guidance that could allow for a further increase in shelter beds to 50 with a pooled testing protocol in place. In order to undertake this renovation in the most expeditious manner, PCHC would like to consolidate all emergency shelter beds at the Ramada Inn for a period not to exceed 30 days to allow for the renovation of the Hope House to occur. The number of individuals at the Ramada would be limited to the number of existing or lost shelter beds, which is currently 71 (66 Hope House and 5 lost beds at BAHS) and decreasing over time in accordance with the depopulation plan. Once renovations are completed, the maximum number of shelter beds at the Hope House will be filled by individuals from the Ramada Inn. This consolidation will allow PCHC's shelter staff to focus efforts on the housing individuals rather than the operational challenges associated with operating two separate locations. Like nearly all employers, PCHC's shelter operations are currently understaffed. Staffing the two locations should be done with 37 FTEs and it is currently operating with about 15-16 FTEs. By concentrating all staffing resources in one location, this will enhance the staff's ability to be more successful with transitioning individuals into more appropriate housing. To further ensure the depopulation goal of the Ramada Inn can be met during this contract extension period, PCHC will not process new intakes into either facility. This necessary action will result in a further increase in the numbers of individuals seeking shelter/housing.